

Manitoba commits to buying two million doses of prospective Canadian COVID-19 vaccine

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Manitoba Premier Brian Pallister speaks at the legislature in Winnipeg on Oct. 7, 2020.

JOHN WOODS/THE CANADIAN PRESS

The Manitoba government is preparing to buy two million doses of a prospective Canadian-made COVID-19 vaccine without going through the federal government.

Premier Brian Pallister says the deal with Providence Therapeutics is necessary because Ottawa has faced problems in getting steady supplies of the existing international Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines.

“We have learned the hard way that we cannot rely on only one source of supply and that supply is somewhere outside of Canada,” Mr. Pallister said Thursday.

Providence, which operates in Toronto and Calgary, started clinical trials last month and hopes to receive federal approval in the fall.

The company signed a term sheet with Manitoba that is contingent on that approval. The deal would see the province get the first 200,000 doses at a price no higher than any other government might secure in the coming months.

Providence’s chief executive officer said the company has been talking with other provinces as well.

“The provinces are very keen to have security of supply. They’re very keen to see this made in Canada,” Brad Sorenson said.

Alberta Premier Jason Kenney said he has spoken with Mr. Sorenson and would like to see domestic vaccine production. But he said Providence has told him production in Canada would only be feasible with 50 million doses ordered.

“An order of that scale would obviously require co-operation across the country,” Mr. Kenney said in Edmonton.

Mr. Sorenson has asked the federal government for a deal but has not received an answer.

The company wants \$150-million from Ottawa to pay for the clinical trials and material costs. In exchange, Providence would offer Canada a 30 per cent discount on market prices and priority access to vaccines that may be needed for variants and booster shots.

The federal minister for public services and procurement said ample supplies of vaccines that are already approved will be arriving in the coming months, and shipments from Pfizer are expected to more than quadruple next week.

“We have secured vaccines for all Canadians who wish to be vaccinated by the end of September 2021, if not before,” Anita Anand said in a statement.

Mr. Pallister said he wrote to the Prime Minister and other premiers Thursday to invite them to join the initiative. He said he didn’t expect any trouble from Ottawa for securing a provincial deal.

“Surely they wouldn’t stand in the way of provinces who have, throughout our history, been responsible for delivering health care,” Mr. Pallister said.

Manitoba’s Opposition New Democrats said they are worried the deal could fall through and pointed to problems the Progressive Conservative government has run into rolling out vaccines and testing sites.

But they support the initiative.

“We need domestic vaccine production capability here in Canada and, if this helps to accomplish that, then I think that that’s something we should welcome and support,” NDP Leader Wab Kinew said.

COVID-19 cases in Manitoba have dropped in recent weeks following a spike in the fall. Health officials reported 90 new cases and three deaths Thursday.

The demand on hospital intensive care units continues to drop as well. This week, for the first time since November, the number of people in intensive care beds for all health conditions dropped below 100.

With files from Dean Bennett in Edmonton.

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